



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS  
GREG ABBOTT

March 17, 2004

Mr. Paul C. Sarahan  
Director, Litigation Division  
Texas Commission on Environmental Quality  
P.O. Box 13087  
Austin, Texas 78711-3087

OR2004-2038

Dear Mr. Sarahan:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 197707.

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (the "commission") received a request for information dated 2003 that relates to the Munoz Borrow Pits or the Hayes-Sammons Warehouse in Hidalgo County, Texas. You inform us that the commission has released some of the requested information. You claim that other responsive information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.107, and 552.111 of the Government Code.<sup>1</sup> You also believe that other responsive information implicates the interests of a private party. You notified the private party of this request and of her right to submit arguments to this office as to why information relating to the private party should not be released.<sup>2</sup> We also received

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<sup>1</sup>As you also initially raised section 552.103, but have submitted no arguments with regard to that section, this ruling does not address the applicability of section 552.103 to any of the submitted information. See Gov't Code § 552.301(e)(1)(A).

<sup>2</sup>See Gov't Code § 552.305(d); Open Records Decision No. 542 (1990) (statutory predecessor to Gov't Code § 552.305 permits governmental body to rely on interested third party to raise and explain applicability of exception to disclosure under certain circumstances).

correspondence from an attorney for the private party. We have considered all of the submitted arguments and have reviewed the information you submitted.<sup>3</sup>

Section 552.107(1) of the Government Code protects information that comes within the attorney-client privilege. When asserting the attorney-client privilege, a governmental body has the burden of providing the necessary facts to demonstrate the elements of the privilege in order to withhold the information at issue. *See* Open Records Decision No. 676 at 6-7 (2002). First, a governmental body must demonstrate that the information constitutes or documents a communication. *Id.* at 7. Second, the communication must have been made “for the purpose of facilitating the rendition of professional legal services” to the client governmental body. *See* TEX. R. EVID. 503(b)(1). The privilege does not apply when an attorney or representative is involved in some capacity other than that of providing or facilitating professional legal services to the client governmental body. *See In re Texas Farmers Ins. Exch.*, 990 S.W.2d 337, 340 (Tex. App.—Texarkana 1999, orig. proceeding) (attorney-client privilege does not apply if attorney acting in capacity other than that of attorney). Governmental attorneys often act in capacities other than that of professional legal counsel, such as administrators, investigators, or managers. Thus, the mere fact that a communication involves an attorney for the government does not demonstrate this element. Third, the privilege applies only to communications between or among clients, client representatives, lawyers, and lawyer representatives. *See* TEX. R. EVID. 503(b)(1)(A), (B), (C), (D), (E). Thus, a governmental body must inform this office of the identities and capacities of the individuals to whom each communication at issue has been made. Lastly, the attorney-client privilege applies only to a *confidential* communication, *id.* 503(b)(1), meaning it was “not intended to be disclosed to third persons other than those to whom disclosure is made in furtherance of the rendition of professional legal services to the client or those reasonably necessary for the transmission of the communication.” *Id.* 503(a)(5). Whether a communication meets this definition depends on the *intent* of the parties involved at the time the information was communicated. *See Osborne v. Johnson*, 954 S.W.2d 180, 184 (Tex. App.—Waco 1997, no writ). Moreover, because the client may elect to waive the privilege at any time, a governmental body must explain that the confidentiality of a communication has been maintained. Section 552.107(1) generally excepts an entire communication that is demonstrated to be protected by the attorney-client privilege unless otherwise waived by the governmental body. *See Huie v. DeShazo*, 922 S.W.2d 920, 923 (Tex. 1996) (privilege extends to entire communication, including facts contained therein).

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<sup>3</sup>You indicate that the submitted documents include representative samples of responsive information. *See* Gov’t Code § 552.301(e)(1)(D). This letter ruling assumes that any such information is truly representative of the responsive information as a whole. This ruling neither reaches nor authorizes the commission to withhold any information that is substantially different from the submitted information. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 499 at 6 (1988), 497 at 4 (1988). You also inform us that a portion of one of the documents at Exhibit B, Tab 3, is not responsive to this request for information. This ruling does not address the public availability of any information that is not responsive to the request.

You claim the attorney-client privilege under section 552.107(1) with regard to all of the information submitted as Attachment B. You inform us that this information consists of discussions among attorneys for and employees of the commission in furtherance of the rendition of professional legal services (Tab 1); a memorandum, drafts of the memorandum, and notes prepared by commission attorneys (Tab 2); and the notes of a commission attorney (Tab 3). Based on your representations and our review of the information at issue, we conclude that you have demonstrated that most of the information is protected by the attorney-client privilege under section 552.107(1). We have marked the information that you may withhold under this section. You have not demonstrated, however, that any of the remaining information in Attachment B actually was communicated between or among privileged parties. We therefore conclude that you may not withhold any of that information under section 552.107(1). *See* TEX.R. EVID. 503(b)(1) (attorney-client privilege protects communications); Open Records Decision No. 676 at 7 (2002) (governmental body must demonstrate that information claimed to be protected by attorney-client privilege constitutes or documents communication).

Section 552.111 of the Government Code excepts from required public disclosure “an interagency or intraagency memorandum or letter that would not be available by law to a party in litigation with the agency.” This exception encompasses the deliberative process privilege. *See* Open Records Decision No. 615 at 2 (1993). The purpose of section 552.111 is to protect advice, opinion, and recommendation in the decisional process and to encourage open and frank discussion in the deliberative process. *See Austin v. City of San Antonio*, 630 S.W.2d 391, 394 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 1982, no writ); Open Records Decision No. 538 at 1-2 (1990). In Open Records Decision No. 615 (1993), this office re-examined the statutory predecessor to section 552.111 in light of the decision in *Texas Department of Public Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408 (Tex. App.—Austin 1992, no writ). We determined that section 552.111 excepts from disclosure only those internal communications that consist of advice, recommendations, opinions, and other material reflecting the policymaking processes of the governmental body. *See* Open Records Decision No. 615 at 5. A governmental body’s policymaking functions do not encompass routine internal administrative or personnel matters, and disclosure of information about such matters will not inhibit free discussion of policy issues among agency personnel. *Id.*; *see also City of Garland v. The Dallas Morning News*, 22 S.W.3d 351 (Tex. 2000) (section 552.111 not applicable to personnel-related communications that did not involve policymaking). A governmental body’s policymaking functions do include administrative and personnel matters of broad scope that affect the governmental body’s policy mission. *See* Open Records Decision No. 631 at 3 (1995). Further, section 552.111 does not protect facts and written observations of facts and events that are severable from advice, opinions, and recommendations. *See* Open Records Decision No. 615 at 5. But, if factual information is so inextricably intertwined with material involving advice, opinion, or recommendation as to make severance of the factual data impractical, the factual information also may be withheld under section 552.111. *See* Open Records Decision No. 313 at 3 (1982).

This office also has concluded that a preliminary draft of a document that is intended for public release in its final form necessarily represents the drafter's advice, opinion, and recommendation with regard to the form and content of the final document, so as to be excepted from disclosure under section 552.111. *See* Open Records Decision No. 559 at 2 (1990) (applying statutory predecessor). Section 552.111 protects factual information in the draft that also will be included in the final version of the document. *See id.* at 2-3. Thus, section 552.111 encompasses the entire contents, including comments, underlining, deletions, and proofreading marks, of a preliminary draft of a policymaking document that will be released to the public in its final form. *See id.* at 2.

You seek to withhold the remaining information in Attachment B under section 552.111. You contend that this information consists of advice, opinions, or recommendations that reflect the policymaking processes of the commission. Based on your arguments and our review of the information at issue, we conclude that section 552.111 is applicable to most of the remaining responsive information in Attachment B. We have marked the information that the commission may withhold under section 552.111.

Next, we address section 552.101 of the Government Code. This section excepts from required public disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." The commission believes that some of the information submitted as Attachment C may be excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 in conjunction with constitutional or common-law privacy. Constitutional privacy under section 552.101 protects two kinds of interests. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 600 at 3-5 (1992), 478 at 4 (1987), 455 at 3-7 (1987); *see also Whalen v. Roe*, 429 U.S. 589, 599-600 (1977). The first is the interest in independence in making certain important decisions related to the "zones of privacy," pertaining to marriage, procreation, contraception, family relationships, and child rearing and education, that have been recognized by the United States Supreme Court. *See* Open Records Decision No. 455 at 3-7 (1987); *see also Fado v. Coon*, 633 F.2d 1172 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1981). The second constitutionally protected privacy interest is in freedom from public disclosure of certain personal matters. *See* Open Records Decision No. 455 at 6-7 (1987); *see also Ramie v. City of Hedwig Village, Tex.*, 765 F.2d 490 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1985), *reh'g denied*, 770 F.2d 1081 (1985), *cert. denied*, 474 U.S. 1062 (1986). This aspect of constitutional privacy balances the individual's privacy interest against the public's interest in the information. *See* Open Records Decision No. 455 at 7 (1987). Constitutional privacy under section 552.101 is reserved for "the most intimate aspects of human affairs." *Id.* at 8 (quoting *Ramie v. City of Hedwig Village*, 765 F.2d at 492).

Section 552.101 also encompasses the common-law right to privacy. Information must be withheld from the public under section 552.101 in conjunction with common-law privacy when the information is (1) highly intimate or embarrassing, such that its release would be highly objectionable to a person of ordinary sensibilities, *and* (2) of no legitimate public interest. *See Industrial Found. v. Texas Ind. Accident Bd.*, 540 S.W.2d 668, 685 (Tex. 1976), *cert. denied*, 430 U.S. 931 (1977). Common-law privacy encompasses certain kinds of

personal financial information. Prior decisions of this office have determined that financial information relating only to an individual ordinarily satisfies the first element of the common-law privacy test, but the public has a legitimate interest in the essential facts about a financial transaction between an individual and a governmental body. *See, e.g.*, Open Records Decision Nos. 545 at 4 (1990) ("In general, we have found the kinds of financial information not excepted from public disclosure by common-law privacy to be those regarding the receipt of governmental funds or debts owed to governmental entities"), 523 at 4 (1989) (noting distinction under common-law privacy between confidential background financial information furnished to public body about individual and basic facts regarding particular financial transaction between individual and public body), 373 at 4 (1983) (determination of whether public's interest in obtaining personal financial information is sufficient to justify its disclosure must be made on case-by-case basis).

You inform us that Attachment C contains financial and commercial information that the commission obtained from a private individual.<sup>4</sup> Having considered your arguments and reviewed the information in question, we conclude that the commission must withhold some of the information in Attachment C under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with common-law privacy. We have marked that information accordingly. We further conclude that none of the remaining information in Attachment C is protected by either constitutional or common-law privacy, and therefore none of the remaining information in Attachment C is excepted from disclosure under section 552.101.

In summary: (1) the commission may withhold the marked information in Attachment B that is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.107(1) and 552.111 of the Government Code; and (2) the commission must withhold the marked information in Attachment C that is confidential under section 552.101 in conjunction with common-law privacy. The commission must release the rest of the submitted information that is responsive to the request.

This letter ruling is limited to the particular records at issue in this request and limited to the facts as presented to us; therefore, this ruling must not be relied upon as a previous determination regarding any other records or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For example, governmental bodies are prohibited from asking the attorney general to reconsider this ruling. Gov't Code § 552.301(f). If the governmental body wants to challenge this ruling, the governmental body must appeal by filing suit in Travis County within 30 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.324(b). In order to get the full benefit of such an appeal, the governmental body must file suit within 10 calendar days.

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<sup>4</sup>In her letter to this office, the private individual's attorney states that the requestor has amended his request to exclude the private individual's commercial/financial information. We have received no confirmation of any amendment of the request from the commission.

*Id.* § 552.353(b)(3), (c). If the governmental body does not appeal this ruling and the governmental body does not comply with it, then both the requestor and the attorney general have the right to file suit against the governmental body to enforce this ruling. *Id.* § 552.321(a).

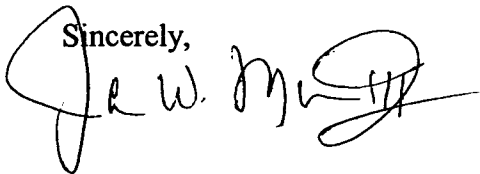
If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, within 10 calendar days of this ruling, the governmental body will do one of the following three things: 1) release the public records; 2) notify the requestor of the exact day, time, and place that copies of the records will be provided or that the records can be inspected; or 3) notify the requestor of the governmental body's intent to challenge this letter ruling in court. If the governmental body fails to do one of these three things within 10 calendar days of this ruling, then the requestor should report that failure to the attorney general's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at (877) 673-6839. The requestor may also file a complaint with the district or county attorney. *Id.* § 552.3215(e).

If this ruling requires or permits the governmental body to withhold all or some of the requested information, the requestor can appeal that decision by suing the governmental body. *Id.* § 552.321(a); *Texas Dep't of Pub. Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408, 411 (Tex. App.—Austin 1992, no writ).

Please remember that under the Act the release of information triggers certain procedures for costs and charges to the requestor. If records are released in compliance with this ruling, be sure that all charges for the information are at or below the legal amounts. Questions or complaints about over-charging must be directed to Hadassah Schloss at the Texas Building and Procurement Commission at (512) 475-2497.

If the governmental body, the requestor, or any other person has questions or comments about this ruling, they may contact our office. We note that a third party may challenge this ruling by filing suit seeking to withhold information from a requestor. Gov't Code § 552.325. Although there is no statutory deadline for contacting us, the attorney general prefers to receive any comments within 10 calendar days of the date of this ruling.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. W. Morris, III", with a stylized flourish at the end.

James W. Morris, III  
Assistant Attorney General  
Open Records Division

JWM/sdk

Ref: ID# 197707

Enc: Submitted documents

c: Mr. Scott McClain  
Texas Center for Policy Studies  
44 East Avenue Suite 306  
Austin, Texas 78701  
(w/o enclosures)

Ms. Celina Romero  
Clark, Thomas & Winters  
P.O. Box 1148  
Austin, Texas 78767  
(w/o enclosures)